Community College Adult Learner Experiences With a Student Success Environment

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Abstract: This paper presents findings from a qualitative case study that investigates how adult learners experience a student success-rich culture within a community college. The data includes 14 semi-structured interviews with ten adult learners and four institutional-academic representatives, in addition to supporting document analysis of national, state, and intuitional student success initiatives and practices. Two findings are presented suggested that there is a divergence in how community college professionals and adult learners perceive and define student success, and that institutional success structures may present barriers to supporting unique adult learner needs.

Keywords: adult learner, postsecondary, adult learner-friendly/focused, community colleges, student success, persistence

Over recent decades, community colleges have increasingly embedded student success initiatives into the fabric of the campus environment and culture (Bailey, 2016). At the same time, the postsecondary adult learner research has not examined adult learner experiences within this evolving context. This paper presents findings from a study that offers an opportunity to analyze student success contexts as they align with adult learner needs, and to better understand the influence that student success approaches may have on adult learner educational experiences.

A significant proportion of postsecondary adult learners choose to attend community colleges. For the 2017-2018 academic year, 39% of students ages 22 and older, and 10 percent of students over age 40 attended community colleges, which indicates nearly half of community college students, as defined by age, are adult learners (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019).

Andragogy theorizes adult learners are self-directed, bring prior experiences, desire relevance, prefer applicability, prefer problem-centered approaches to learning, and exhibit a high degree of intrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1984, Merriam et al., 2012). Tinto's (1987)'s interactionist theory quantitatively predicts persistence through a combination of variables, such as a student's background, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and a commitment to a goal with a student's level of academic and social engagement with an institution (Chaves, 2006). The student and the institution continuously engage in both an educational and social context, where persistence "hinges on the construction of educational communities in colleges, programs, and classroom levels which integrate students into the ongoing social and intellectual life of the institution" (Tinto, 1987, p. 188).

Building on Tinto (1987), Bean and Metzner (1984) developed the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model, which theorizes that social interaction is a necessary but insufficient factor for analyzing adult learner persistence. The model posits that attrition, intent to leave,

student background, and environmental variables and the interactions among these variables hold more significance on adult learner persistence than the effect of academic and social integration (Oden, 2011). Additional research holds that if the academic and environmental factors are positive, an adult learner will persist; when both are negative, they will not (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017; Crawford-Sorey & Duggan, 2008). When academics are positive, but the environment is negative, the adult learner will not be as persistent. Finally, if the environment is positive, but the academics are negative, the adult learner will be more likely to persist because support is in place to guide completion (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017; Crawford-Sorey & Duggan, 2008).

When an adult learner experiences certain types of stress or barriers, she/he will not persist even with a high GPA, though with positive institutional support he/she will persist (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017; Capps, 2012; Garner, 2019). Poor academic performance does not necessarily impact persistence if the adult learner feels supported (Capps, 2012; Garner, 2019). Clark (2012) examined adult learner persistence at a community college. Building upon Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering and Rendon's (1994) theory of validation, Clark (2012) explored adult learners' self-perceptions of factors that positively impact their persistence. The study concluded that an adult learner is likely to persist when faculty and staff demonstrate that the adult learner's presence and contributions mattered, which is consistent with Schlossberg's (1989) theory.

For the past decade, a dramatic shift has redefined commitment to access and equity to support underrepresented populations, align programs with 21st-century careers, and increase institutional transparency (Bailey, 2016). This movement, referred to as *student success*, is characterized by a data-driven culture that is measured and evidenced by degree or credential completion rates, clearly designed pathways, and labor market outcomes (Bailey et al., 2005; McClenney, 2013: Wyner, 2014).

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL, 1999) benchmarking study identified best practices used by colleges and universities that effectively focused adult learners. Currently, CAEL's (2020) Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners serves as a vital resource framework. Framework principles provide a consistent and understandable structure that shapes adult learner experiences and institutional response to adult learner needs, as well as adult learner success and completion. Other initiatives such as CAEL's (2018) Adult Learner 360 help institutions assess whether their environment exemplifies AFLI and offers tools and best practices to implement ALFI principles. That said, few institutions engage in this benchmarking, even those who self-identify as welcoming to adult learners (Erisman and Steele, 2015). The reasons for this are complex, with Erisman and Steele (2015), suggesting there is a lack of general awareness of resources and research regarding adult learner importance and this leads to reduced leadership buy-in.

The student success environment builds upon an assumption that consistently offered wrap-around strategies will ensure success and completion for all students (Bragg & Durham, 2012). This presumes that all students, including adult learners, seek completion of a specific subset of credentials, learn at the same pace and in the same manner, or if not, will nonetheless benefit from the supports. At present there is no empirical or best practices data which focuses on the nature of adult learner experiences within a student success community college context.

Research Design

An instrumental case study is appropriate when the research seeks to understand more than just the case or something that is not obvious to the researcher as an observer (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995; Tellis, 1979). The research question follows: How do adult learners uniquely perceive their student experiences at a community college immersed in a student success culture?

The site met the following criteria as a community college that, (a) self-identified as student success focused; (b) had evidence of student success initiatives, policies and practices (consistent with state and national definitions); and, (c) immersed in student success goals and methods for a minimum of three years. Southeastern Community College (SCC) is a medium-sized community college that serves two rural counties in a southeastern state. In addition, SCC was an early adopter and participated in numerous funded national student success initiatives and has cultivated a culture based on an explicit student success driven climate.

SCC's demographics included students with an average student age of 24. Adult learners, students over the age of 25, represent 38% of enrollment (SCC, 2018). When disaggregated, the enrollment at SSC presented a lower average age because students under age 24 consisted of traditional-age learners (18-24 years) and of early college/career learners who were under age 18. SCC has 170 curriculum and continuing education programs.

The data collection included 14 semi-structured interviews, 10 with adult learners and four with academic student success professionals and document analysis of strategic vision, policy, advising, and student success indicator data. A priori and open coding phases were completed, and this paper presents two of the study findings.

Finding #1: Community College Professionals and Adult Learners Define and Operationalize Student Success Definitions in Divergent Ways

During the interviews, community college professionals defined student success in structured, normative ways that aligned with the national student success movement. Their responses reflected the institutional definitions of students acquiring or completing a credential within a specified timeframe, the avoidance of swirling patterns, and the implementation of specific uniform institution-wide strategies such as guided pathways, or student success courses. The community college professionals who are in direct contact with adult learners grappled with pressure. They wanted to recognize and support an adult learner's desire to set their own goals and were required to prioritize institutional expectations. Academic representative #1 described how sometimes the adult learner's goal is minimalized and replaced by SCC's goal for student success.

> I think we have student success when the student meets their goal. That doesn't always match up with we're measuring as being successful at a community college. *Sometimes student success, they might get their goal, but it wasn't their goal to begin with*. On some levels, we are seen as the student is not successful. *We have students who leave without completing a credential, but that was their goal. I thought we were successful with the student if they met their personal goal* [emphasis added].

In contrast, the adult learner participants defined their student success as the meeting of an individual goal and achieving a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Swirling patterns were viewed as 'okay' as long as they were a means of balancing professional and personal goals. The adult learners defined success *as meeting their individual goals for their betterment or benefiting their careers as measured against what was before their enrollment at SCC.* Coley, a retired and disabled military veteran, used his 9/11 education benefits to pursue lifelong learning for his benefit.

> After being retired from the military, I was able to use my 9/11 GI bill [educational benefit]. These [degrees] are just for me. It's knowledge. It was interest. I was able to take, with general education especially, a lot of political sciences, histories, biologies, lots of stuff that I had been interested in or that I hadn't been able to do before.

Finding #2: The Student Success Practice of Student Identity as "Alike" and the Uniqueness of an Adult Learner are Somewhat in Conflict.

The data suggested that for academic student success professionals, there was institutional buy-in that it was important to follow the recommended priority categories of analysis to guide their policies and practices. While some categories, such as tracking completion patterns and benchmarks of success for students of color were disaggregated, in general students who were adult, first generation or unique in other ways were categorized and labeled within a larger category of nontraditional. While on the surface, this makes logical sense and is a small change, it created a sense of environmental pressure to disregard or consider unique adult learner identity, characteristics and needs as a part of the prioritization of a uniform larger nontraditional category. For adult learners, they had a keen awareness or feeling associated with not being recognized at the institutional or classroom level as adult learners. The importance of this label was significant – it meant that adult learners bumped into moments where their presence and needs were set aside or unacknowledged, or at times, acknowledged but not addressed.

This working culture also surfaced in terms of mandatory institutional success supports – for instance, student success first year courses or tutoring services, inadvertently serving as one more barrier for adult learners who were already balancing multiple work, family and professional demands in addition to their student role. Psychologically, the adult learner participants shared that it also was a subtle reminder that their unique needs, which they recognized as important, were not viewed as important by the community college.

Discussion

The study findings signal that well intentioned student success strategies which are especially at the forefront in community colleges may in fact lead to unintended consequences. Adult learners in this study were caught in a dynamic tension about meeting individual needs and fitting into evolving college priorities and metrics that moved them further rather than closer to an adult learner optional environment. The adult learner participants in this study clearly appreciated the availability of support structures and were aware of student success language, initiatives and climate. Just as the learners suppressed elements of their adult learner identity, the institutional professionals also described an awareness and a concomitant suppression or bracketing of adult learner presence and expectations or needs as a direct response to student success culture.

Frontline faculty and staff play a pivotal role as facilitators, mentors, and a person-to-person touchpoint for academic and support services.

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